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12-1998

# Ways of Exchange in the LBA Eastern Mediterranean: The Evidence of Marked Vases

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### Repository Citation

Hirschfeld, N. (1998). Ways of exchange in the LBA eastern Mediterranean: The evidence of marked vases. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 42(1), 212-213. doi: 10.1111/j.2041-5370.1998.tb00730.x

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4 December 1996

WAYS OF EXCHANGE IN THE LBA EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:  
THE EVIDENCE OF MARKED VASES

Nicole Hirschfeld

Thousands of Late Bronze Age vases were traded among the nations of the eastern Mediterranean littoral. At least 900 still preserve marks incised or painted on their handles, bases or bodies. At first sight, the variety of mark-types, the range of vases marked, and the wide dispersal of the marked vessels yields an impression of jumble. But on closer inspection, patterns of marking begin to become evident. The fact that patterns do appear lends credence to the task of trying to discover what those marks might mean.

Most detailed reports of an archaeological excavation will include mention of a potmark or two, if not many more. The general impression is that potmarks are ubiquitous, but this is not so. In fact, the archaeological record is punctuated by potmarking episodes – specific periods and regions where it was usual to paint or impress or incise some sort of a sign, usually on a particular kind of ware or range of vessel shapes, and often on certain parts of the pot. A well-known example is the series of small impressed dots and dashes inconspicuously impressed into the bases and lower bodies of cups and bowls known from late Early Bronze and Middle Bronze Age sites in the Cyclades, Aigina, and the Argolid.

In the 14th and 13th century eastern Mediterranean littoral, the practice of marking pottery falls into specific and limited categories. First, only in Egypt and Cyprus (and possibly the Anatolian coast) was it routine to mark locally produced pottery. Even there, marking was confined to certain shapes and wares which were almost exclusively destined for local use and circulation. Second, potmarks also occur systematically, though by no means frequently, on certain ceramic types commonly traded among the regions of the eastern Mediterranean: Minoan coarseware stirrup jars, Mycenaean fine-ware decorated vases, and Canaanite amphorae. Note that there is little correlation between the types of exported vases marked, and the marking habits in their homelands.

In fact, the marks appearing on traded pottery may have little to do with their places of origin. This is certainly true of the Aegean vases with incised signs, which are without doubt connected with Cyprus, and probably specifically with Cypriot traders. The connection with Cypriot marking practices is clear. The signs themselves are clearly related to the Cypriot LBA script (Cypro-Minoan) and no other; and technical features of these marks (their ductus and placement on the vases) mirror those on Cypriot pottery, but are without parallel in the Aegean. Also, most of the Mycenaean vases marked in this way have been found on Cyprus. It seems to have been a connection based on the traders: it can be demonstrated that these marks are not connected with place of origin or destination, quality or quantity of contents, value or function of container, producer and probably not owner. The only explanation which fits all the patterns and features observed in relation to the marks, their vases, and the contexts in which they appear is that these signs were applied by someone in the middle – a merchant or distributor or handler of the vases. Given the technical features of the signs, it seems most likely that the maker was a Cypriot.

The incising of Cypriot signs into Mycenaean vases was limited in time and scope, restricted to a specific period (LH/LM IIIA-B) and encompassing primarily two kinds of vases: large storage vessels (stirrup jars and FS 36 piriform jars) and pottery with pictorial decoration (mainly the large kraters). A second way of marking traded

Mycenaean pottery, by means of painted signs, seems also to be connected with Cyprus because the signs identifiable with a formal script are almost exclusively Cypro-Minoan. (An exceptional few may be connected with a cuneiform script). Like the incised marks, the painted signs on Mycenaean pottery appear to be a LH III phenomenon. But in contrast to the incised signs, painted marks appear on a much wider and, with the significant exception of pictorial pottery, a completely different range of shapes, consisting mostly of small decorated fine-wares.

In other words, Aegean pottery channeled into the export trade seems to have been marked differently depending on its destination (intra- or extra-Aegean) and type. For example, LM IIIB stirrup jars destined for the Mycenaean world might carry Linear B inscriptions, while those exported outside the Aegean might be marked with a Cypriot sign. Or, different kinds of Mycenaean pottery sent east would be marked differently depending on the kind of vase: incised signs on large storage vessels, painted signs on decorated fine-wares. Only pictorial vases could fall into either category. These exclusive ways of marking pottery indicate, I think, a strictly stratified organization of trade, with different kinds of goods administered separately. In both cases of extra-Mycenaean dealings, however, a Cypriot organizational presence is implied.

Cypriot administration of pottery imported to Cyprus is not surprising. And Cypriot marks on Mycenaean pottery traded further east also makes sense in view of Vronwy Hankey's thesis that Cyprus was a trans-shipment point for Mycenaean pottery eventually ending up in Syro-Palestine. On the other hand, the appearance of Cypriot-marked Mycenaean pottery in the Argolid needs explication. I suggest that the most likely explanation is that these marked pots indicate the presence of Cypriot merchants in the Peloponnese, selecting and marking pottery for shipment eastward. Similarly in the case of marked Minoan vases now found on the Egyptian coast, I suggest that the most economical explanation involves the direct involvement of Cypriot merchants on this trade route.

'Canaanite' jars, too, were marked, almost exclusively with incised marks. In contrast to the incised signs on Aegean pottery, there are clearly several kinds of marking systems in use on this type of container, possibly originating in different regions, probably with different meanings, and certainly in use over a much longer time span. I am currently examining the interrelation of these different markings, and their overlaps with the systems on Aegean pottery.

It is true that the preserved evidence for the organization of the pottery and container trade is in no way complete. In terms of how the vessels themselves might have been 'tagged', it is likely that attached labels and sealings on stoppers would have provided information in addition to, perhaps sometimes instead of, the marks painted and incised directly onto the vessel. At present, however, those painted and incised marks are all we have; luckily, the preserved corpus is sufficient for patterns to emerge and, with them, interpretations.